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February 25, 2009: Reactions to the Religion Dispatches Interview

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Title: Reactions to the Religion Dispatches Interview

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2/25/2009--Because of the reach of the online magazine Religion Dispatches, and especially once Andrew Sullivan picked up the interview on his blog, there have been a lot of reactions on the Internet to the proposal for a Hallowed Secularism. This is all being done without anyone actually reading the book, of course, but the interview seems to me a fair capsule of the overall message. The discussion that is going on is probably reflective of what will be thought when people do read the book—at least those people who can afford it.

I have noticed two trends worth mentioning. One is the incipient atheist counterattack. Obviously Hallowed Secularism represents a goal for people with genuine religious yearnings. This is in a sense what hard atheism wants to stamp out of people. Such yearnings are felt to represent a sentimental unwillingness to face the emptiness and formal meaninglessness (I mean without purpose) of existence. Since yearnings are hard to combat, this attack seems to center on my claims that values are objective and that history contains a moral center.

I am not by nature a partisan. And of course I have no interest in defending error. So, I am not inclined to respond by defense. These are matters I am hoping to open up. If the claims of this kind of atheism are made explicit, I think they will be rejected as an inadequate account of human life and cosmic reality.

Let me just say here that it seems odd to me that when science investigates the physical universe, the atheist assumes that something real is being discovered. Even though knowledge is inexact and judgments and disagreements are common, no one calls the scientific quest subjective. No one says that the scientist is simply choosing among possible accounts. No one would think one account just as good as another.

But when the matter being investigated is morality, or broadly how we should live, the atheist assumes the opposite. I see no justification for this dichotomy. People do differ in their moral commitments, although not usually as much as the atheist claims. Yet over time, that is, in history, they don't differ very much. To take one example, humanity discovered something about chattel slavery. Absent a total discontinuity in human history, we will never go back to it. This discovery seems to me pretty similar to Newton's discovery of the laws of motion. Morality is not a matter of choice just because it is a matter of disagreement.

The other response is the claim that Hallowed Secularism is Deism, roughly the 17th Century belief in an absent Creator God whose plan for humankind unfolds without further divine intervention. While I can see why this parallel might be claimed, I never found Deism very helpful in religious matters. On one level, Deism is too rational. There is no real place for prayer or spiritual experience. Yet these experiences are common to human beings. In an opposite sense, Deism is too theistic, too wedded to the Creator God of the Bible. If there really is no being-like God with a plan, humans are stuck with the processes of the natural universe. This is the problem of the asteroid. Most Deists would claim, I think, that it could not be God's plan that humanity be destroyed by an asteroid. But the Hallowed Secularist believes that nature follows its own course, quite without that kind of pity. Deism was always too comfortable and reassuring to be true.